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STATE FOR NEA/MAG, INR/NESA/NAP

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SUBJECT: Casablanca Political Party Leaders Speak Out

REF: A) CASABLANCA 0737
B) RABAT 308
C) RABAT 565
D) RABAT 1358

Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In an introductory round of calls on various Casablanca-based political party leaders and executive board members we heard many similar concerns regarding Morocco's upcoming 2007 elections.

--Every political activist we encountered expressed an interest in the election poll conducted by IRI earlier this year. The majority of those to whom we spoke were concerned about Moroccans misinterpreting the poll, which claimed that 46 percent of likely Moroccan voters would hypothetically vote for the PJD if the election were held at the time of the survey.

--There was strong interest in the subject of continued constitutional reform. Most agreed that to build a strong democracy the office of Prime Minister, the Parliament, and the Judiciary must be endowed with additional power and greater independence.

--We asked what they would like to see the US do to support democratization Morocco in the future. Our interlocutors praised IRI and NDI's good governance and parliamentary programs, and urged greater initiative in job development in Morocco as a means to reduce the opportunity for extremism. Finally, several urged that the U.S. work to improve its image in the region. Strengthening American credibility would further the process of democratization.

¶2. (U) During June and July we met with: Ali Belhaj, founder and president of Alliance de Libertes (ADL); Abderrahim Lahjouji, founder and president of Forces Citoyennes (FC); Ahmed Kadiri, longest serving parliamentarian and political bureau member of Istiqlal; Fatima Belmoudden, parliamentarian and member of the political bureau of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP); and Nouzha Skalli, parliamentarian and political bureau member of the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS). Post requested a meeting with Mostapha Ramid, hard-line parliamentarian and outspoken member of the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), Morocco's Islamist party. However, Ramid refused to meet, citing the US presence in Iraq as the grounds for the refusal(ref A). End Summary

Reaction to the IRI Poll

¶ 13. (C) The PJD's standing with the electorate, as described in the IRI poll, was a prominent concern of the political leaders in Casablanca with whom we met. The Parliamentarians from USFP and PPS voiced dismay with the poll. Fatima Belmoudden of USFP was concerned, not only with the results of the poll, but with how they were presented in the press. Belmoudden claimed that the results sent a powerful message "because the poll was from the U.S." She claimed that, because popular culture is different in Morocco than it is in the U.S., the poll is "too foreign a concept" and could be easily misunderstood. She did concede that the poll might be read as simply a "warning signal" about the popularity of the PJD. But she was pessimistic that the PJD, if given the opportunity, would reverse the reforms that Morocco has undertaken in recent years.

¶ 14. (C) Belmoudden went on to say that there are those in parliament who believe that the poll results, showing a potentially strong performance by the PJD, are the U.S.' way of supporting a moderate Islamist party in Morocco. She expressed concern that both the U.S. and the EU are supporting moderate Islamist movements worldwide in order to discourage more radical Islamist parties. She cited a recent program that the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted in Morocco, funded by the USG, for female political leaders. According to Belmoudden, the organizers asked for 20 female parliamentarians, but she claimed they specifically stated that at least two should be from the PJD. (Note: While USAID, who overseas the NDI program, says this is not possible Belmoudden clearly believed it. End Note) This behavior, she said, "sends the wrong message." It registered with Moroccan politicians as specific U.S. interest in promoting the PJD.

¶ 15. (C) PPS parliamentarian Dr. Nouzha Skalli expressed very similar concerns. She claimed that many politicians were unhappy with the poll and saw it as highly misleading. It appears to encourage people to "join the PJD." Like Belmoudden, she believes the poll is further evidence that the West is supporting "moderate" Islamic movements at the expense of all others. She mentioned, as an example, the international assembly she attended in Istanbul in April 2006, sponsored by the Washington-based non-profit National Endowment for Democracy. According to Skalli "the panels were all full of moderate Islamists and there was no room for non-Islamist parties." In her opinion the American initiatives to promote democracy were positive but the execution was sometimes a problem for her and those like her.

In response to each of our interlocutors concerns, we assured them that the U.S. is interested in supporting the process of democratization and has no interest in favoring one party over another.

¶ 16. (C) In contrast to the other parliamentarians' sentiments, Ali Belhaj, the American educated founder of the liberal ADL, saw the poll as a much-needed instigator of public debate. Belhaj was far less concerned with the results of the poll than with the idea of the poll itself. He concluded that the elections are over a year off and the situation was likely to change in the coming months. (Note: Like Belhaj, the Ministry of the Interior may have been inspired by IRI's poll since it is currently undertaking its own polls which will be published regularly on its soon to be launched internet site, according to contacts in the Ministry's Communications Office. End Note)

Democracy and Political Reform

¶ 17. (C) Looking beyond the 2007 elections, each politician agreed that additional constitutional reform is necessary for Morocco to progress, but there was little consensus as to how or when those changes could occur. While all saw Morocco as a budding democracy, many conceded that giving real power and greater independence to the Prime Minister, parliament, and judiciary, is the only way to form a true democratic state. Some expressed concerns, however, about corruption and lack of good governance that could hinder reforms.

¶ 18. (C) FC stood alone in its assessment that perhaps "the people of Morocco are not completely ready for democracy just yet," although they agreed in principle that "ultimately the people need to have the power." FC is a small party of liberal businesspeople and

intellectuals who have recently signed a compact with the PJD. What the FC gets from the relationship is a broader base because of its association with a large and influential party in exchange for providing the PJD with economic/business expertise. In addition, by collaborating with the FC the PJD may be seeking to broaden its base.

(Note: Recently there has been speculation that the FC and ADL may also form an alliance. In this pre-electoral environment partnerships and alliances between parties remain fluid as changes to the electoral code are presented. End Note)

What Can the U.S. do for Morocco?

¶19. (C) Toward the end of each meeting we made it clear that the U.S. strongly supports the democratic process in Morocco and asked what more the U.S. could do to support the country's efforts in that direction. A number of the political activists immediately pointed to IRI and NDI's good governance and parliamentary programs as particularly effective. Our interlocutors also encouraged more investment in economic development to help curb unemployment and fight poverty and extremism.

¶110. (C) By contrast to the other party representatives, long time parliamentarian, Ahmed Kadiri, of the Istiqlal party, had perhaps the most traditional "to do" list for the U.S. From his opulent traditional Moroccan home, Kadiri faulted the U.S. for not taking an active enough role in the Western Sahara issue. He claimed that the U.S. has a responsibility because of its understanding of the issue and must be more active in helping Morocco find a "political solution." At the same time, he made it clear that the Western Sahara is part of Morocco and always will be. In addition, he stated that the U.S. has a strong role to play in economic development and reform in his country. "The US must make more financial investments in Morocco and less in Israel," Kadiri declared. Another step that the U.S. should be taking, he stated, is to increase the number of Diversity Visas available for Moroccans, as well as making other types of immigrant and non-immigrant visas more easily attainable. (Note: Kadiri was accompanied in the meeting by his son, a recent graduate of the Casablanca American School student who will soon be leaving Morocco to attend university in the U.S., where other family members are already settled. End Note)

¶11. (C) Another prominent topic of conversation was the U.S. image in the Middle East. Abdurrahim Lahjouji of FC claimed the best thing that the U.S. could do for Morocco was to "fix" its own image. He declared "you are a true democracy" but in order for others to want to follow your example you need to "improve your credibility." Lahjouji pointed to U.S. involvement in Iraq and claimed it would help the US image enormously to leave the country as soon as possible.

Comment

¶112. (C) Our conversations took place before the recent developments in Gaza and Lebanon, and probably would have been quite different if held in the past week or two. While those we met were still mildly critical of some U.S. policies, they were also clearly keen to express their interest in expanding and strengthening the U.S.-Moroccan relationship. The politicians' apprehension, however, over the IRI poll and its misunderstood "prediction" of a PJD win stood out as a matter of concern. We have heard similar sentiments from others in Casablanca and will continue to monitor local political and business reactions as the elections approach.

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